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ABSTRACT

In "Common Ground: Dialogue, Understanding, and the Teaching of Composition," Kurt Spellmeyer seeks to familiarize students and teachers with the linguistic and cultural no-man's-land separating them. Reinstating the value of two writing conventions often used by traditional students--expressive and commonplaces--can help expand on the horizons of "Common Ground." Typically, it is argued that personal expression invariably becomes romantic writing or writing for catharsis. Writing for discovery fails as well because students repeat cliched commonplaces instead of expressing and evaluating simultaneously. However, a brief study of phenomenological philosophy can further clarify how Spellmeyer's "misreading" thesis encourages the evolution of a linguistic common ground that includes these two conventions. Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes language as a gesture, an act of the body that bears upon language's origin in the carnal world. It cannot be known why a specific word is chosen but once it is, no other can take its place without referring to other contexts. There is a givenness, a quality exclusive to itself, in language, even in students' speech and writing. All this suggests that educators must recognize the value of their students' writing before they suggest ways of making it more academic or conventional. Tampering with a speaker's language twists its given contexts and may rob it of its original force of expression. Excerpts from Virginia Woolf's "To the Lighthouse" illustrate the complex relationship between experience, emotion, and language. (TB)

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Common Ground: Expanding our Horizons

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In Common Ground: Dialogue, Understanding, and the Teaching of Composition, Kurt Spellmeyer argues that our composition students are forced to choose between home life and school life when we exclude their less conventional interpretations from the classroom. Spellmeyer resolves that "we really have no choice but to permit their participation in the communicative action of our disciplines, before and not after they join us in specific practices" if we are to offer students more than an all-or-nothing sort of academic membership (179).

Common Ground seeks to familiarize students and teachers with the linguistic and cultural no-man's-land separating them. Spellmeyer articulates the benefits of linguistic cross-cultural exchange:

> The proliferation of new coinages and nuances, the transposition of words across disciplines, the borrowing of words from other languages, the interaction between different genres and traditions of representation, all of these can contribute to the enhancement of both specialized knowledge and the lived world . . . . (212)

I would like to expand the horizons of the common ground Spellmeyer has already claimed by reinstating the value of two writing conventions often used by traditional students:

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expressive writing and commonplaces. Typically, it is argued that personal expression invariably becomes Romantic writing or writing for catharsis. Writing for discovery fails as well, it is said, because students repeat cliched commonplaces instead of expressing and evaluating simultaneously. Advocates of expressive writing or of "common-sense" attitudes have been left on composition theory's front step with the door slammed in their faces, wondering "Was it something I said?" And--as in many cases of failed communication--expressive writing and commonplaces could benefit from another chance at explanation. A brief study of phenomenological philosophy can further clarify how Spellmeyer's "misreading" thesis encourages the evolution of a linguistic common ground that includes these two conventions.

Phenomenological philosophy articulates the human's preconscious relationship with its world and with others. One sees the movement of trees in a gentle wind; the breeze is like a loving touch, and the trees' response to the wind reminds one of the instinctual response of the touched, as if the trees and wind respond to one another in a humanlike caress. Likewise, watching young animals at play calls up memories of childhood playfulness, pretending games and rituals. We discover surprisingly accurate comparisons of our own memories, emotions and expressions in the life-world; we share a fragile sense of be-ing with the trees bowed in the wind or animals at play.

Besides giving an alternate view to the world, which will help establish common cultural and expressive ground,

phenomenology provides a linguistic basis as well. Maurice Merleau-Ponty described language as a gesture--an act of the body that bears upon language's origin in the carnal world. Like a wave or a shrug, the linguistic gesture cannot be removed from its expressive context without losing some references. Endless combinations of references and contexts, embedded in a unique style, create speaking or writing that bears the stamp of the speaker and of the expressive moment.

We cannot know why a specific word is chosen, but once it is used no other can take its place without the new referring to other contexts. There is a givenness, a quality exclusive to itself, in language, even in our students' speech and writing, in the same way the world presents itself to us before we can cognize it. If we change our students' language, if we suggest conventions not of their lived contexts without first allowing them to apprehend them themselves, we are in danger of twisting it, deforming it, enacting violence on it.

Contrary to Patricia Bizzell's argument that acquiring a new language involves the acquisition of a whole new world view, the fact of our bodies is that, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "we never live in two worlds at once" (Phenomenology of Perception 187). The world is one, and all learning occurs from and in that world. It is only because I recognize the power of expression in my own language that "I am capable of entering into other systems of expression, by understanding them at first of variants of my own system and then allowing myself to be inhabited by them to the point of thinking of my

own language as a variant of theirs" (Merleau-Ponty "Science" 40). The new language and their corresponding contexts must be joined to the original language and its contexts for true expression to occur.

We should recognize the value of our students' writing before we suggest ways of making it more academic or conventional. Tampering with a speaker's language twists its given contexts and may rob it of its original force of expression. The opening up of new linguistic contexts requires time and patience, so students may not adopt linguistic features as quickly as we like. But at least we can be sure that they know what they are saying, and can take responsibility for it, when they come to it themselves.

The linguistic basis phenomenology provides proves that social and cultural boundaries are less important than recognizing that all live in the same world. But boundaries between humans and their experience with things break down as well. Probably the best example of this dissolving of self-other boundaries in literature is found in Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse, as Mrs. Ramsay identifies with the lighthouse beam and, even as she calls it "irrational," experiences sympathy for natural things:

> Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; . . . and pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke, . . .It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone,

> one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself. (63-64)

If we replaced the "one" with "her" in this section, the passage would specifically relate to Mrs. Ramsay only, and make the phenomenological moment of experience into one of subjectivity. While it is true that phenomenology finds its basis in subjectivity, it extends that basis to include all of humanity in a common apperception of the world which phenomenologists call "intersubjectivity." The experience Mrs. Ramsay has gazing at the lighthouse beam is a communion with things open to all of us; any of us could be the "one" experiencing.

The same problem we have in naming experience surfaces in writing; we have difficulty drawing the line between what can be genuinely expressive and what is Romantic writing. However, Romanticism constructs the world to suit the viewer's needs. When I am angry, the world is hateful; a memory, a tune, or a look seem to me barbs sent by the world just to make me angry. A Romantic thinker or writer will continue to hold the world in that construct long after the mood or the conflict has ended simply to make it suit her will.

Some characteristics of the phenomenological experience seem to encourage constructing the world to suit individual needs. Turning again to <u>To the Lighthouse</u>, Woolf opens the

novel by showing how the depersonalization of the phenomenological experience can at first seem like a Romantic thrust of emotions onto the world.

> . . .since to such people even in earliest childhood any turn in the wheel of sensation has the power to crystallize and transfix the moment upon which its gloom or radiance rests, James Ramsay, sitting on the floor cutting out pictures from the illustrated catalogue of the Army and Navy Stores, endowed the picture of a refrigerator, as his mother spoke, with heavenly bliss. It was fringed with joy. (3)

James' experience of emotion is actually evidence that, as Merleau-Ponty explains, "my fundamental capacity for self-feeling, tends paradoxically to diffuse itself" ("Dialogue and the Perception of the Other" 135). James' dialogic relationship with the world is affirmed and enriched through each new attentive experience, till his identity will be, like his mother's, inextricably bound to the world. The Cartesian cogito is eventually eclipsed, as Merleau-Ponty explains:

> I cannot say that I see the blue of the sky in the sense in which I say that I understand a book or again in which I decide to devote my life to mathematics. . . .if I wanted to render precisely the perceptual experience, I ought to say that one perceives in me, and not that I perceive. Every sensation carries within it the germ of a dream of depersonalization. (Phenomenology of Perception 295)

What we may read as an expressivist or Romantic writing could be evidence of a student's particular way of seeing the world and acknowledging dialogue with it. For that reason, we should be careful before discounting entire student essays as expressivist or Romantic writing; instead, we should ask students to explore further ideas of which we are unsure.

Writing expressively can offer dialogic opportunities, especially if it is grounded in the phenomenological attitude. Phenomenology recognizes the cultural, historical, linguistic and other influences of the world on individual perception. So while the phenomenological experience begins subjectively, it necessarily moves out from the individual in concentric circles.

Like expressive writing, writing using commonplaces is another kind of writing which moves toward the individual's contexts of experience. The problem with writing from common sense, as Clifford Geertz described it, is its "of course-ness" and sense of "it figures" which traps it in its own constructs. In Common Ground Spellmeyer translates Geertz's position for writing theory:

> [S]tudents are often unable to read actively and write perceptively, not because they have yet to learn the codes of our culture, but because these codes are so familiar--familiar rather than meaningful--that students cannot make that cultural text less commonplace and cliched, in ways that would faciliate the enlargement of understanding. (Spellmeyer 125)

But in Glynda Hull and Mike Rose's article "The Logic of an Unconventional Reading," they note that the student writer discussed is unable to recognize the symbols in a poem as such because his "social distance . . . isn't as marked as that of the conventional/middle-class reader, and this might make certain images less foreign to him. . . Paradoxically, familiarity might work against certain kinds of dramatic response" (293-294). What if we apply this study to ourselves? Since some of us are from the same cultural background as the majority of our students, can we even see the value in their commonplaces? And if we work in a classroom culture different than our own, are we not vulnerable to privileging certain modes of discourse or conventions simply because they are not ours?

The difficulty in seeing the value in commonplaces is the same in philosophy, and is what made Husserl's "bracketing" necessary. Merleau-Ponty describes the common-sense attitude and phenomenology's solution:

> Not because we reject the certainties of common sense and a natural attitude to things . . . but because, being the supposed basis of any thought, they are taken for granted, and go unnoticed, and because in order to arouse them and bring them to view, we have to suspend for a moment our recognition of them. (Phenomenology of Perception xiii)

It's not so much that we don't want students to write using commonplaces as we want students to suspend their recognition of them. Common sense doesn't represent meaninglessness as much as it represents thoughtlessness;

students who use it don't deconstruct it, they reconstruct their lives to fit it. If we do secretly prefer some nontraditional students' writings for their ability to challenge and critique common sense attitudes, it's because nontraditional students have had a cultural dislocation that has made close and careful reading critical to their self-fashioning; they've struggled to create their own constructs rather than blindly adopting the majority's. I believe that if traditional students are taught to see the world phenomenologically, they will be able to suspend their recognition of commonplaces. Native speakers could then cross the common-sense boundary and create knowledge for themselves, finally becoming responsible for their own learning.

How do we get students to see knowledge from the other side? Ethnographer Renato Rosaldo, when confronted with a powerful experience of appercepting another culture's common sense, said, "you either understand it or you don't. And, for the longest time I simply did not" (1-2). Rosaldo found the value in common sense when he proved the answer to his question, "Do people always in fact describe most thickly what matters most to them?" can be "no" (2). He explains how he came to see common sense differently:

> When Ilongots told me, as they often did, how the rage in bereavement could impel men to headhunt, I brushed aside their one-line accounts as too simple, thin, opaque, implausible, stereotypical, or otherwise unsatisfying. . . .Only after being repositioned

> through a devastating loss of my own could I better grasp that Ilongot older men mean precisely what they say when they describe the anger in bereavement as the source of their desire to cut off human heads. (3)

In fact, Rosaldo himself had to experience great loss--the accidental death of his wife and professional partner--to understand that the pat answer the Ilongots gave him had profound meaning.

I believe our students use commonplaces as a place to begin original thinking, or as a construct in which they feel safe to express themselves genuinely. I would propose that we do not criticize students' use of common sense attitudes, but ask how they came to their conclusions of common sense. The answer might be "I don't know"--an unthinking adoption--or it could be a narrative of a process, much like Rosaldo's, in which the student was forced to acknowledge the power of that notion in her own life.[1]

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Note

[1] Many of the ideas in this paper dealing with the phenomenology of emotion should be attributed to Glen A. Mazis at The Pennsylvania State University, Capital College, from which I learned them.